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The teacher as researcher in the context of language teaching

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Abstract

This study highlights the importance of action research in the process of EFL teaching. It shows how the teacher can utilize action research as a vital means for promoting learning outcomes and solving teaching problems encountered in the classroom. The paper presents the results of a teaching experiment, employing collaborative action research in two EFL classes in which English was taught through English. The use of action research inspired the authors to develop a teaching approach that takes learners' linguistic, cognitive and affective traits into consideration. The experiment was applied throughout a whole semester. The paper reports on the workability and success of this approach in creating a thriving teaching learning atmosphere. The results also supported and recommended the use of collaborative action research in solving teaching problems in classrooms.

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1. Introduction

The teaching-learning process can be viewed as an intellectual game in which a number of players take part in different roles. The major role players are the teacher, the learner and the textbook. These three principal elements constitute the pillars of success in the educational process, and any deficiency in the role of any of these participants may negatively affect the accomplishment of the anticipated learning outcomes. This paper focuses on what the researchers of the current paper believe to be the most significant and effective factor in this complex process, namely the teacher. However, stressing the role of the teacher does not underestimate the roles of the other participants involved in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, teacher preparation and teacher training have been accorded tremendous efforts in educational professional development plans. Unfortunately, teachers have been treated as passive agents in most of the professional development activities and programs. Experienced educators, educational theorists and superintendents usually hold seminars, organize workshops and deliver lectures to teachers who pay attention to such experts and go back to their classrooms to implement what they had learned in those training sessions. In this respect, Gould (2008: pp.5-7) holds that:

Much of the professional development for teachers is still passive 'sit and get' training. Typically, teachers attend workshops on topics they find interesting and then attempt to implement one or two of the ideas gleaned into their classrooms. Though adequate, this model will not create sweeping improvements in teaching and learning.

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This practice motivated us to review the teacher's roles in order to see to what extent has the teacher been viewed as an active participant in the teaching-learning process.

2. Objectives and rationale of the study

This study explores the extent to which action research can have an impact on promoting learning outcomes and solving teaching problems encountered in the classroom. It also investigates the roles that foreign language teachers can play in solving teaching problems independently and without resorting to educational administrators and supervisors. In other words, this study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What are the major roles of the teacher?
2. Why is teacher research important?
3. How can English language teachers use action research as a springboard to develop effective teaching methods that can contribute to solving teaching problems in their EFL classes?

The impetus that stands behind conducting this study stemmed from the researchers' experience in teaching English as a foreign language and teacher training. The researchers organized several training workshops for the English language teachers in the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Jordan and Saudi Arabia in which hundreds of teachers participated. Trainees were asked to make a list of the roles of the English language teachers and they were only able to mention a few of the major traditional roles, including the teacher as master of the class, classroom director, disciplinarian, facilitator, controller, time manager, information provider and examiner. These roles reflect the roles that those teachers used to practice. Interestingly enough, the role of the teacher as researcher was not mentioned at all. The absence of this role and the lack of the teachers' awareness of this vital role motivated the researchers to examine this role and see how it can be implemented in teaching English as a foreign language.

3. Teacher's roles

The teacher's roles in the teaching-learning process have been extensively discussed in educational literature. Brown (2001:166-168) stated a few of the major teacher's roles including the following:

1. The teacher as controller: This is the traditional role in which the teacher is the master of everything that takes place in the classroom. He controls what the students do, what and when they should speak and participate in class.
2. The teacher as director: The teacher manages the process of students' interaction in the classroom to make sure that it moves smoothly and efficiently.
3. The teacher as manager: He plans lessons and manages the progress of students as well as the classroom time.
4. The teacher as facilitator: He helps the students overcome whatever difficulties they might encounter in the process of learning and thus makes learning easier for them.
5. The teacher as resource: In this role, the teacher plays a less directive role where students take the initiative and ask the teacher for advice and counsel. This means that the teacher should always be ready to respond to students' queries and requests whenever they seek his/her help.

In her book titled *The Perfect Teacher*, Leaman (2008: 31-100) extensively elaborated the various roles and responsibilities of the teacher. She talked about the role of the teacher as an effective communicator with his students, an organizer of the entire process of learning as well as all the classroom activities, a disciplinarian who controls the class and maintains order, a facilitator of learning, and a person in charge of coping with stress and communicating with parents. Furthermore, Harrison and Killion (2007: 74-77) discussed ten roles for teacher leaders. They stated that a teacher is supposed to play the following roles: resource provider, instructor, curriculum

specialist, classroom supporter, facilitator, mentor, leader, catalyst for change, learner and data coach. Lerner (2004: 32) expected a more liberal role for a teacher when he argued that a visionary teacher should "never content with the status quo but rather always look for a better way." This statement calls for extending the teacher's roles to involve the role of researcher. This means that the teacher needs to develop an inquisitive attitude in order to identify teaching problems and pose question, set up hypotheses and attempts to verify them in order to acquire a better understanding of the teaching-learning process.

4. Action research

It might be expedient at this point to define the term *action research*. The term 'action research' was first coined by Kurt Levin, a professor at MIT, in 1944 in his article titled 'Action Research and Minority Problems.' Many scholars such as Allwright and Bailey (1991), McKernan (1988), Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990), Rainey (2000), McDonough (2006), and Burns (2010) have attempted a definition of this term. McKernan (1988:154), for example, states that teacher research involves "rigorous examination of one's own practice as a basis for professional development." Burns (2010:2) states that action research is "a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching context." Richards and Farrell (2005: 171) hold that action research refers to "teacher conducted classroom research that seeks to clarify and resolve practical teaching issues and problems." They also state, "The word 'research' refers to a systematic approach to carrying out investigations and collecting information that is designed to illuminate an issue or problem and to improve classroom practice", whereas the word 'action' refers to "taking practical action to resolve classroom problems."

4.1 Significance of teacher's research

The role of the teacher in the classroom is no longer viewed as merely a provider of information, a manager, a facilitator, or a controller. In addition to these traditional roles and responsibilities, the teacher is currently considered an active catalyst for change in teaching practices, course design and problem solving. Brown (2001: 445) supports the view that a teacher should be an agent for change in his educational environment. He addresses teachers, saying "You are an agent for change in a world in desperate need for change: change from competition to cooperation, from powerlessness to empowerment, from conflict to resolution, from prejudice to understanding."

The role of the teacher as researcher transfers teachers from a state of powerlessness to a state of power and from being mere receivers of training and lecturing to initiators of change and more efficient and active teachers. Action research has extended its scope and started to have applications in different fields including teaching. The significance of action research in the context of language teaching can be summed up as follows:

1. It aims at improving teaching and learning practices in classrooms because it attempts to find solutions to specific problems that a teacher or a group of teachers may encounter in teaching a certain subject. It is usually conducted at small-scale levels for practical purposes rather than for the purposes of theoretical research.
2. It is practical, manageable and can be carried out by a single classroom teacher or in collaboration with other colleagues. That is why it is sometimes referred to as classroom-based or collaborative research because it handles problems that practicing teachers really encounter in their daily teaching activities.
3. Action research conducted by teachers contributes to changing and re-defining the traditional role of teachers. Teachers who conduct action research will be in a better position to create desirable changes in their teaching practices. In fact, they become initiators of pedagogical changes and improvements rather than recipients of ready-made proposals. Sagor (1992: 5) emphasizes the necessity for creating a shift in teachers' roles. He holds, "By changing the role of teachers, we can profoundly change the teaching and learning process in our schools."

4. Action research promotes the teachers' understanding of the teaching process and enhances their problem solving knowledge and skills. Once a teacher feels that his action research has been fruitful and has led to solving a certain problem, his confidence builds up and he becomes more prepared to take risks by investigating more teaching problems and finding solutions.
5. It can revitalize our teaching and lead to positive change in our teaching practices.
6. It raises teachers' awareness of the difficulties involved in their jobs and the complexities of teaching and learning.
7. Action research is conducive to faster professional development on the part of teachers because teacher changes and decisions will be based on reliable data collection (Burns, 2010: 7).
8. It helps teachers develop more effective and more focused teaching materials.
9. It develops the teacher's research skills, enhances their self-esteem and promotes their awareness of their students' needs.
10. It allows and trains teachers to observe, analyze and reflect on the problematic areas in their teaching.
11. It also reinforces the spirit of team and collaborative work among the teachers of the same subject. They can share experiences and solutions for the problems they encounter in their classes.

Other researchers who have highlighted the advantages of action and collaborative action research include Richards and Farrell (2005:171-194; Atay (2006); Burns (2010: 6-7).

It has become clear that action/collaborative action research seems to be indispensable for language teachers. They have to be encouraged to practice conducting such a type of research. Practicing teachers need to be involved in in-service training workshops to train them how to conduct action research individually and collaboratively. Furthermore, a component on action research needs to be incorporated in the teacher training courses and programs at the undergraduate as well as the graduate levels.

4.2 Steps of action research

Most researchers in action research agree on the essence of the concept of this type of research and its steps or procedures. Burns (2002: 14-15; 2010: 8) identifies four basic steps necessary for conducting action research. The following is a brief description of these steps:

1. Planning: This step involves identifying a problem and developing a plan of action to be carried out for the purpose of finding a solution for the targeted problem.
2. Action: This phase means implementing the plan over a certain period of time.
3. Observation: This is a process of systematic observation of the effects of the action and documenting the effects of the procedures on the target audience and recoding their reactions.
4. Reflection: At this stage, the teacher reflects on, evaluates and describes the effects of the action in order to understand what has happened to plan for further cycles of action research (Burns: p.8).

Richard and Lockhart (1994:12-13) elaborated these steps as follows:

A teacher or a group of teachers need to:

1. Select an issue or a problematic area that they may wish to investigate, and raise a question or more regarding this issue in order to specify what they want to do.
2. Select a suitable procedure for collecting information about the target question or problem.
3. Collect information and analyze it in order to tell what changes are necessary to make in the teaching practices.
4. Develop an action plan in order to implement the desired changes in the classroom.

5. Observe the effects of the plan on teaching behavior.
6. Initiate a second action cycle, if necessary.

These procedures indicate that action research starts with raising a question that identifies a certain problem, gathering relevant data, establishing an action plan to carry out the investigation and reflecting on the effects of the action in order to evaluate how successful the plan was. To see this in practice, the researchers of this study report their experience in the field of action research.

5. Action research in the language classroom

Believing in the significance and effectiveness of collaborative action research in finding practical solutions to teaching problems, and yielding better results in learning English, the researchers decided to conduct an action research project on two groups of Arab learners of English. The experiment proceeded as follows:

5.1 Problem: The researchers noticed that the students of the two sections of Intermediate ESL had developed strong aversion to learning English and using it in oral communication.

5.2 Students: The students in these classes are MA students majoring in humanity-oriented fields such as history, sociology, Islamic Shari'a (jurisprudence), and law. These students had studied English as a school or university subject for at least 8 years.

5.3 Desired learning outcomes: The experiment aimed at (a) changing the attitudes of the students towards learning English in general, (b) convincing them of the importance of learning English in their future careers, and (c) training them to communicate in English without using Arabic. The main objective was to see to what extent considering learners' linguistic, cognitive and affective traits in the process of teaching can be conducive to successful learning.

5.4 Information: When the researchers asked the students, in Arabic, why they had that negative attitude towards learning English, they stated that they were used to learning English through Arabic, their mother tongue. Therefore, they became almost conditioned to the extent that they were not ready to listen to English without being translated into Arabic. That is probably why most high school graduates join the university with a shallow level of competence in English that does not exceed a poor reading ability.

5.5 Action plan: The researchers followed a cognitive/affective approach that comprises three main levels: the orientation level, the language preparation level and the actual teaching process level. In the first level, the researchers attempted to raise to the level of students' consciousness: (a) the importance of English in the world of today, (b) the importance of teaching English through English, and (c) the importance of learners' tolerance of vagueness and discomfort, particularly in the beginning stages of applying the plan. The researchers started by discussing the reasons contributing to the students' weakness in English as seen by the students themselves. Then, after discussing learners' input, the authors proposed a cognitive/affective-oriented approach to create a communicative teaching atmosphere that utilizes English to teach English.

To raise to the level of consciousness the importance of English today, the researchers informed the learners that English has become the language of business in most public and private institutions, local and multinational, especially with the advent of the age of globalization. Rarely can one find a job that does not require English. No matter how competent an applicant for a job may be, a working knowledge of English can be the decisive factor in getting that job. The researchers gave examples of excellent employees whom they know and who do not get promoted to higher positions merely because their English is not up to the mark.

Once the researchers felt that they had sharpened their learners' awareness of the significance of this language, they moved to the second important point, namely the best ways to learn it. Here the researchers made it clear that the best way to learn English is to go to learn it in its native land; however, the second best way is to learn English through English. The students challenged this view, indicating that it was difficult to learn English completely through English. However, the teachers assured them that effective cooperation with the teachers would render the learning process easy and fruitful. In the implementation phase of the plan, the teachers assured the learners that using English in class would help them activate the grammatical rules and lexical items dormant in their cognitive background. The students were encouraged to ask questions, request the teachers to slow down when needed, etc. It is worth mentioning that these steps were explained to the students in Arabic because the researchers wanted them to comprehend the style of teaching that would be followed in these two classes.

The second level, the language preparation level, involved equipping learners, with lists of words and phrases, expressions, chunks and questions that are frequently used in class. Such lists were felt to be crucial to prepare learners for a smooth take-off, i.e. starting to learn English through English. The following are examples:

5.6 Important questions: The researchers gave the students a list of important questions that they could use to get information relating to meaning, pronunciation of words, etc. The following are examples:

Excuse me sir -- What is the meaning of this word?
 How do you pronounce this word, please?
 Could you speak slowly, please?
 I didn't understand – could you repeat what you said, please?

5.6.1 Frequently used expressions and chunks: Researchers felt that memorizing certain expressions and chunks were meant to help build students' confidence, and in fact, they did; the students felt pleased when they found themselves using these bits and pieces of the language. These include: Open/Close your book, Raise your hand, Come here, Work in pairs, Work in twos, etc.

5.6.2 Frequently used verbs in class: After the students had learned the list of questions and the partial list of classroom instructions through carefully tailored classroom activities, the researchers distributed another list that contained some of the most frequently used verbs. Such verbs include: *go, write, say, do*, etc. Appropriately designed classroom activities helped learners comprehend both the meaning and basic use of these verbs.

5.6.3 Frequently used words in class: Finally, the teachers distributed a handout that contained a partial list of the most frequently used words in class, i.e., words that tend to repeat themselves very often in the two researchers' teaching.

The third level involves an eclectic use of procedures and techniques from different teaching approaches and trends, particularly the Communicative Approach with a view to creating a cognitive/affective atmosphere in class.

5.7 Observation: while applying the action plan, the researchers asked the students at the end of each class to jot down any comments, in Arabic or in English, regarding the new style of teaching. They also asked them to indicate the moments when they got lost, moments when they found themselves learning. The students were encouraged to email their comments to the teachers before the next class. The two researchers held regular meetings to examine the students' comments and to report to each other the results of applying their cognitive/affective approach. They related to each other their class observations, techniques they improvised to tackle unexpected problems. The comments of the students together with the observations of both researchers were used to modify their teaching approach. Starting the fourth week, the researcher found that most of the comments and feedback they received were positive. The students started to feel more comfortable in listening to English and interacting with each other in English, though at a limited scale. They started to have more confidence in themselves and began to realize that they

can communicate in English without any use of Arabic. In fact, by the end of the course, each student gave a three-to five-minute presentation in English.

At the end of the semester, we asked the students to talk about their reactions to the approach and most of them expressed their pleasure with it. Observing the students' ability to communicate in English, we were more confident that the plan was fruitful and well-received.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The authors of this paper think that the preceding procedures can help English teachers make a smooth start with beginning learners. Applying them can set the scene for successful learning, since they take learner's cognition and emotions into account. Supplying learners with some language items is an essential cognitive procedure for such an introductory input will function as a schema or background information to which learners can connect newly taught language items, and this makes learning meaningful. Similarly, assuring learners that they can learn English through English and that teachers will use carefully designed activities that facilitate the teaching-learning process is also essential in alleviating the anxiety that usually characterizes the atmosphere in beginning EFL classes. The success of this experiment in collaborative action research is worth sharing with other colleagues. It is also imperative that teachers be trained to conduct action research in their classrooms. Although teachers are not usually paid or rewarded for such an effort, nor are they given any time off their teaching load, school administrations should do so because viable pedagogical changes are those that originate in the field by the real field practitioners, the teachers, and not those imposed on them by theoreticians or administrators. If we really anticipate changes that would last, teachers should be convinced of them and willing to implement them. This conclusion corroborates what Brown (2001: 445) stated that "a teacher should be an agent for change in his educational environment."

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